Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

The Story of My Life

written by

Anne Cassidy

published by

Scholastic

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

ONE

SATURDAY, 17 DECEMBER, 10.42 P.M.

The last thing Kenny Harris wanted was blood on his hands. He almost smiled at this thought. Wasn't it too late to worry about such things? He was in too deep. He couldn't turn back now.

He was standing on Leyton platform. The Central Line. Above him a clock hung like a huge blank face, its hands stuck at three forty. He looked at his mobile to check the time. 22:48. He thought of Nat waiting for him at her house. He imagined himself trying to explain it all to her. The mess he was in. He found the words of an argument playing through his mind. He saw himself appealing to her. *I wasn't always like this*, he would say, his hands out in supplication.

He had to stop. The air was heavy with rain but there wasn't a sound as it hit the ground. The clock stared sullenly and he took a deep breath. He looked down at his bruised hand, his battered jeans, his busted-up trainers. With his good hand he felt above his eyebrow

for the cut. It had stopped bleeding but was swollen and sore to touch.

He shivered with the cold. He turned and looked along the track for the glow of an approaching train but there was just a thick slice of blackness. He listened intently for a second. There it was, he was sure, in the distance; the rhythmic clatter of the wheels.

Where are you, Tommy?

The words ran through his head. A couple of people appeared on the platform opposite. A man and a woman, standing silently side by side. Like two ghosts that had come from nowhere.

Tommy Fortune. Where are you?

The man opposite said something to the woman. She turned her head away. In the distance there was the sound of a car braking. A sudden screech that set Kenny's teeth on edge.

He had five, six hours left to find him.

The drizzle turned to rain abruptly. Just like that. It hammered on to the tracks and Kenny stepped back, away from the platform edge, into the dry. He watched the rain spearing down, invisible in the darkness but under the light it shone like steel.

His hand touched the back pocket of his jeans. The letter was there, folded in two. He'd taken days to write it and now it was finished. What would he do with it?

Something fluttered in his stomach. He could walk away. Leave things to sort themselves out. But wouldn't

that just make Mack more angry? And make things worse?

His hands were cold. He shoved them into his jacket pockets and grimaced as pain shot through his injured fingers. It made him feel nauseous for a moment. No, worse than that. The shock of the beating came back to him. Being thrown around like a rag doll, punched in the head, kicked in the thigh, his fingers smashed up. From the ground he'd looked up expecting more but there was just the sound of the car pulling away, revving up the road, leaving him like a rubbish bag on the street.

Was he afraid of Mack? Yes, he was. After tonight, Tommy Fortune would be afraid of him as well.

He steeled himself. *Keep calm.* With his good hand he cradled his bruised fingers, his crushed knuckle. If he could just get *warm.*

Looking along the track he saw the distant light of the train. He'd been right, had heard it from miles away. One stop to Stratford and then he would get the Docklands Light Railway to Poplar. It wouldn't take him long. He breathed deeply but felt his chest tightening. He coughed a couple of times and searched around in his pockets for his inhaler. He shook it and frowned. It felt empty. Pretty soon he wouldn't be able to breathe at all. He'd have no choice but to go home. He put it in his mouth and inhaled gently as the train rumbled in filling the platform with yellow light.

He got into the carriage and sat in the first seat

available, his legs splayed. It was almost empty. Just one old bald man sitting in the corner seat, a book open on his lap. He looked over at Kenny, his forehead wrinkling. Kenny turned away. Exactly how bad did he look? The man went back to his book, crossing his legs as if to ward Kenny off.

Kenny made himself focus on the window. They were still above ground. The rain was hitting the glass in darts and he leaned back, feeling the warmth of the carriage, and closed his eyes. After a while he felt the suck of the train as it went back underground.

He got off at Stratford. Like Leyton, the station was above ground and even though it was late the platform was busy. People were standing in groups waiting for overground trains or walking towards the exits to change on to other lines. The platforms were brightly lit up, bathed in the lights from the nearby high-rise buildings. Kenny squinted into the light. He saw the rain turning into snow before his eyes. In the windows of the glass buildings he could see triangles of coloured lights. Christmas trees everywhere. It was all too bright, too cheerful. He turned away and walked briskly towards the darker end of the station where the Docklands Light Railway terminated.

There was one other person standing waiting. A young woman with a baby in a pushchair. When he got closer he could see that she was younger than he'd thought. Fourteen, fifteen maybe. She had hardly any hair and a piercing right in the middle of her top lip. The baby, a toddler, was sound asleep. She gave him

a funny look and started to back away, reversing the pushchair. He backed off himself. He must look a fright.

A beeping sound made him turn away. He pulled his mobile out and looked at the screen. Two messages. His fingers were too sore and stiff to press the buttons so he had to use his other hand. It took a minute.

The first message was from Nat. *Where are you? I've waited all night!!!*

The second was from Mack. *Don't forget. By six at the latest. Bring Tommy to the Sugar House.*

He had to find him first.

From out of the dark he saw a square of light. It was small and bright and he could hear the sound of it chugging towards him. The DLR. The train that didn't need a driver. He watched it get bigger and finally trundle into the station. The first time he had travelled on it he had been thrilled. He'd sat at the front as though he, himself, was the driver. How old had he been? Eight, nine? Just a boy.

The doors opened and half a dozen people got off. The girl with the pushchair walked towards the front end and got on. Kenny went to the rear carriage and sat down. He snapped his mobile shut. It lay in his good hand cold and solid. It was brand new, his birthday present from his mum and dad. His birthday, ten days before. A day he wanted to forget. He squeezed his eyelids shut. He would push it away. He would close it up behind some heavy door in his head. His seventeenth birthday. The worst night of his life.

He stared at his reflection in the glass opposite. Ghostly. Ghastly.

The doors of the train closed and a second later it moved off, into the darkness.

TWO

MEETING JIMMY MACKINTOSH

Three months before. September. That was when everything took a turn for the worse. Kenny was coming home from Oxford Street, standing on the Docklands Light Railway platform at Stratford. He was feeling pleased with himself. In his bag were some DVDs he'd been searching for; *Scarface*, *Goodfellas* (special edition) and *French Connection I* and *II* in a boxed set, something he hadn't expected to find. It was just after ten and he was humming to himself, looking forward to getting home and fitting his purchases on to his shelves in alphabetical order. It wouldn't be long, he thought, until he needed to get another set of shelves to house his collection.

It gave him a good feeling.

Kenny turned away from the tracks and saw a familiar face. It was Natalie, his brother's girlfriend. She was at the far end, nearer the bright lights of the main platforms. She was leaning against a post and looked

weighed down by shopping bags. At that moment she noticed him and gave a little wave, raising a couple of her bags in the air. She walked in his direction and he felt a little flip in his chest and straightened his belt as he slowly walked towards her.

She was wearing cut-off jeans and a flimsy top. She looked cold. He had an impulse to put an arm around her and warm her up. He dismissed it, pushed it out of his head. She was *his brother's girlfriend* for pity's sake.

"Hey!" she said.

He stood by her, self-conscious, shy for a moment and looked around to avoid eye contact. That was when he noticed a group of lads approaching further along the platform.

"Shopping?" he said, stupidly.

"Got paid today. Thought I'd treat myself. You?"

"Got some DVDs," he said, pointing to his bag.

"Let's see!" she said, brightly.

He pulled them out, holding them like a pack of cards. She picked one out.

"Joe said you liked war type movies," she said, turning it over and reading the back.

"Not *war*," Kenny said, dismissively. "Gangster genre. Mafia, organized crime, that sort of stuff."

"A sort of war, then?" she said, smiling at him, touching his hand lightly when she replaced the DVD. "Good against bad?"

He opened his mouth to argue but then saw that she was teasing him. He swallowed a couple of times and put the DVDs back in their bag.

"Not seeing Joe tonight?" he said, stating the obvious.

Why couldn't he think of anything good to say?

"He's working late. You should know. He's your brother!" she said with a little laugh.

Her hair was standing up on her head, as if it had been blown that way. She saw him looking and dropped a couple of her bags and reached up to pat her head.

"I must look a state!" she said.

Kenny didn't answer. For a few seconds he looked straight at her and she didn't look away. She knew she looked good. He could see it in her face, in her direct stare. It was he who lowered his eyes. She was his brother's *girlfriend*. He turned his body away from her and saw, with surprise, that the lads who had been further along the platform were now about ten metres away.

Natalie hadn't seemed to notice but he felt a vague sense of unease. There were three of them, two white and one black. They were about his age, wearing casual stuff, the black kid in an Arsenal shirt. The tall white boy had round glasses on that made him look like a student. Kenny felt a flicker of recognition, as if he knew him from somewhere.

"Joe says you're starting your A levels this year?" Natalie said, oblivious to the change in the atmosphere.

Kenny nodded, keeping the three of them in the corner of his eye. They were looking across at him and he felt a charge in the air and stood as tall as he could.

"I'm in year twelve, I don't know if Joe told you. I'm hoping to go to Bournemouth next year to do American Studies."

"That's interesting," he said, only half aware of what she was saying.

"It means I get to go to the States for a year. Quite crafty of me, really!"

She carried on talking as the three boys started to move in their direction. He glanced down at her and gave polite answers but his attention was elsewhere, a frisson of fear tingling through him. Twisting round he looked along the line, to see if a train was coming. It wasn't. He turned back and was face to face with the tall white kid, who had taken his glasses off. Kenny held his stare for four, five seconds, until the kid blinked and looked away. Natalie had stopped talking and was looking mystified.

"What's the matter?" she said, turning to look at the tall white kid and then back to Kenny.

"Let's move," he said.

He took her elbow and steered her along the platform towards the exit. He wasn't a coward but there were three of them and one of him. Natalie was faffing about with the bags. She was talking on and had no idea what was happening. He tried to hurry her but she was dithering. The black lad sped up and walked across their path, forcing them to stop. Kenny dropped his eyes to the ground and stepped to the side, roughly pushing Natalie along with him. Just ten more steps and they'd be in the bright lights of the main platforms. Just ten steps.

"What's wrong, Kenny? What's going on? I need to get the DLR. . ."

But he had to stop. The white boy who was no longer

wearing his glasses was shoulder to shoulder with him edging him into the wall. He had no choice. He stood still and pushed Natalie on.

"What's the matter?" she said and stood for a moment looking at him and then at the three lads. He could almost see the wheels turning in her head.

He squared his shoulders.

"What?" he said, staring hard at the white boy.

Natalie's face had a puzzled look, a half smile one moment, a frown the next.

"You want this?" he said, shoving his hand in his pocket, pulling out his mobile.

The black kid swore and started to laugh.

Kenny's back was stiff and hard. He gripped his mobile.

"Even my mum's got a better mobile than that!" the white kid said.

"I know you," Kenny said. "You used to go to my school with my brother Joe. You're Jon Tibbs."

"Joe Harris's little brother!" he said. "The kid who thinks he's hard!"

"Don't show me up. I'm with. . ."

Kenny pointed at Natalie.

"She's not bad. Good tits," the black kid said.

Jon Tibbs put his arm around Nat's shoulder and pulled her towards him. Natalie swore and shook him off. They all laughed. Kenny felt himself tighten up, his muscles hardening, his jaw like steel. He looked at Natalie's face, dismayed, confused, holding her clothes-shop bags up to her chest. His eye rested on hers for

only a second. It was enough. He sharpened his shoulders and lowered his head, dropping the bag with the DVDs on to the ground. Using every bit of strength he took a sudden lunge at the black kid, ramming him and knocking him over so that he fell backwards on to the platform, his head hitting the concrete.

"Get out, Natalie!"

He hissed and braced himself as Jon Tibbs jumped on his back and forced him down on to the ground, smacking his face on to the concrete. He closed his eyes and steeled himself as a ball of pain exploded in his side and then another. They only had trainers on but each kick seemed to be steel-capped. He could hear Natalie squealing and shouting but her words were far away, too far away to be of any help. Three against one. The black kid was still lying on the ground and Kenny reached out and grabbed his face, using his fingers he searched out the boy's eyes, trying to do damage. He felt his shoulders wrenching back, though, as the other two dragged him along the platform into the blackness, away from the light. Nat's cries were like whispers in the back of his head.

"Oi!"

A voice cut through the darkness. Loud and insistent. Kenny slumped on to the ground, no longer being dragged or held.

"You! Leave him alone. Leave that lad alone."

He turned his face and saw some polished shoes marching in his direction. Dark trousers with creases. He should make an effort to get up, make the most of

the distraction, but the pain in his sides was eating away at him, taking great bites out of his ribs.

He saw the feet of the two white kids moving away. All the time they were swearing and shouting at the man with the smart trousers. Kenny saw them pick their mate up off the ground and pass Natalie as she came running back up the platform followed by a small man in a London Transport uniform. He saw a hand extended in his direction.

"Let me help you up, mate."

He allowed the man to help him up, his legs feeling like elastic bands.

"You're in a bit of mess," he said.

He had a suit jacket on with an open-necked shirt. He wasn't old, maybe twenty-five. There was a low rumble in the distance. It distracted Kenny. A train.

"I'm all right," he mumbled, embarrassed now.

He wasn't all right. His sides were on fire and when Natalie reached him she put her arm around his waist to help steady him. He had to lean on her to walk and he tried to focus through the stream of complaints she was making to the Underground worker, her voice shrill.

"I'll take you to the hospital, if you like," the man said.

In the background the London Transport man was backing away.

"No, I'll just go home," said Kenny. "It's just a couple of bruises."

"I don't think so, mate. You look pretty roughed up to me."

The train came in, lighting the platform up. The man

turned and walked back up the platform, bent down to pick something up and came back towards him. The train doors opened and a couple of people got out. Kenny edged Natalie on. The man handed him his bag of DVDs.

"I could travel with you. Just in case. . ."

"I'm all right. Thanks. . ."

"No problem. My name's Jimmy Mackintosh. People call me Mack."

"Thanks," Kenny said and stepped on to the train, his elbow clamped against his side, holding his ribs as still as he could. The carriage was empty and he sat down in the first seat he could. Nat gave the man a wave as the doors closed.

"Thank God he came along!" she said, sitting beside him, her face scrunched up with fright and worry, her eyes still red from crying.

It was his first meeting with Mack. There were more to come.